

# THE DARK NIGHT

A Tale of the Lothians

by

The Author of "The Misty Morning"

*Here is a nineteenth century story which touches all the Victorian buttons: love thwarted; an innocent girl exposed by socially ambitious parents to seduction by the landowner's son; a tyrannical father supported by an evilly scheming butler; death by consumption of an angelic, self-sacrificing young woman; a cast of simple, golden-hearted country folk, and death by drowning of the remaining young protagonists on the eponymous "Dark Night". Virtue resides in the young, even eventually in the seducer, who are presented as victims of an older, grasping generation of well-to-do parents, and also among the uncorrupted poor who come eagerly to the rescue of their social superiors, the young victims of parental misanthropy, greed and ambition.*

*Published in 1858 in Edinburgh by Thomas Grant, **The Dark Night** tells the story of Flora Graham, only child of Mr and Mrs Graham. Flora has a childhood sweetheart, Elliot Ralston, now a student preparing for the ministry. Flora herself has led a sheltered, protected existence, her father being laird of a small property, Cocklowrie, which borders on the much larger estate of Crooplecandy owned by the miserly and domineering Rupert Fouatt. Rupert too has an only child, Jasper, who is completely under his father's thumb. The two landowners are sworn enemies.*

*The book opens by introducing us on a dark and stormy winter's night to lonely Woodcock's Castle, despite its name a woodcutter's cottage, where the tenant and his daughter, Caroline, lead a simple and contented existence. Meantime outside in the tempest a despairing Elliot Ralston is engaged in a rather improbable soliloquy which reveals to the reader that he has been jilted by Flora who has seemingly told him that she never wants to see him again. Having contemplated drowning himself in the river, and exhausted by emotion and exposure to the weather, he stumbles upon the cottage whose occupants take him in.*

*Later on we learn that Flora has by chance met Jasper Fouatt, and her parents, seeing an opportunity to gain an interest in the Crooplecandy estate, have instructed their gardener to tell Ralston in Flora's name, but unbeknownst to her, that he is no longer welcome. The Graham parents, having got rid of Elliot Ralston and eager to foster a relationship between their daughter and the young laird, Jasper, invite him constantly to their home and do all they can to leave the couple alone together, hoping to promote their engagement. Thus through their greed they bear a heavy responsibility for Flora's ensuing pregnancy which coincides with her desertion by Jasper. Flora's outraged father, after a fruitless appeal to Rupert Fouatt to get his son to do the decent thing and marry the girl, throws her out of the house to find what shelter she can. She is rescued by Mrs Monypenny and her husband, Mungo, toll keeper on the main road, who give her a room in their house out of kindness and pity for her plight.*

*While all this is going on, Elliot Ralston has been finding Caroline Hazleton, the woodman's daughter, increasingly attractive and has fallen in love again. Unfortunately saintly Caroline is dying slowly of TB and they both know death is not far off. Flora too has formed a friendship with Caroline, after the woodcutter has offered her hospitality on finding her wandering the fields in a distressed condition upon the realisation that she is pregnant.*

*Jasper, in the meantime, having seduced Flora, avoids all contact with her family and does not know of her pregnancy. His wicked father conceals it from him too. In any case, he has found a new distraction in the form of sexy, flirtatious Fanny Harebell, niece of Dr. Harebell, a retired naval surgeon who occupies the role of philanthropic general practitioner in the hamlet of Knockdrumlie. Before long Jasper's father, anxious lest his son should discover Flora's condition, and on the advice of his repellent butler, Whitteruck, despatches the young man to the home of a distant aunt.*

*These tangled relationships begin to unravel when Flora's child is born in the Monypennys' house, the birth being attended by Dr Harebell who at the same time is ministering to the dying laird, old Rupert Fouatt. The doctor writes to Jasper to recall him to his father's deathbed, and to tell him that he is himself now a father and that he must do the honourable thing by Flora. In the cottage Caroline's disease is reaching its final stages and in an affecting scene the dying girl tries to persuade Elliot that when she dies he should return to his earlier love and rescue her from her unhappy situation. The author appears to have set up a clever, interesting climax when Jasper tells the doctor he will make amends by marrying Flora, while we, as readers, have been led to believe that Elliot will, on Caroline's imminent death, also go back to Flora. We look forward to discovering how she will deal with the potential conflict; whether she will choose the father of her child or the man she really loved. We expect the two young men to face not just each other, but a complex moral dilemma.*

*However, the ending is the weakest part of the book and seems to be a cop-out by the author as the story descends into near farcical melodrama. Instead of developing the expected denouement, the author drops his three main characters through a hole in a bridge and drowns them in the swollen river, thus neatly disposing of their problems and of the one he has set himself.*

*He does get them to the bridge in pitch darkness in a fairly convincing way. Flora takes advantage of a lull in the bad weather to pay a last visit to her friend Caroline, having arranged that Mungo will come after dark to escort her home. While she is there Jasper arrives at the toll house looking for Flora and redemption. He volunteers to replace Mungo as Flora's companion on her return journey. When they fail to come back Mungo goes to find them and discovers at the cottage that neither had reached it that night: Elliot had, however, been there all evening and had only just left.*

*The sequence of events on the dark night of the title stretches credulity from the moment the bogle reputed to haunt Bogle's Howe and to manifest itself by striking night travellers with a sharp blow from behind, turns out to be an aggressive goat of nocturnal habits. The goat is the device used by the author to reveal all at the end as it is instrumental in saving*

*Mungo Monypenny from falling through the hole in the bridge that has already claimed the lives of Flora, Jasper and Elliot. Having collared the goat that has knocked him over in Bogle's Howe, Mungo drags it to the bridge which it refuses to cross. Alarmed by the animal's terror, Mungo feels his way slowly forward in the darkness and discovers the planks in the centre of the bridge have been swept away in the storm. He realises at once the fate that has befallen his young friends whose bodies are recovered from the river the next day. Mungo and his wife get to keep the baby while Mrs Graham, who never wanted to cast Flora off in the first place, stops talking to her pompous and self-satisfied husband, which is no great loss to her.*

*Despite its ending, the book is a surprisingly enjoyable read once one has become accustomed to the ponderous literary style of the period. The author interweaves the various strands of his complicated plot with considerable skill and there are genuinely dramatic moments such as the encounter between Mr Graham and Rupert Fouatt in which the reader enjoys the complete discomfiture and humiliation of the former when the laird draws a gun on him to clinch the argument. The relationship of Mr and Mrs Graham, their social pretensions and his conceited opinion of his own judgement are convincingly rendered. If the young people are somewhat colourless, the same is not true of Mungo Monypenny and his wife. The author has a wonderful command of Scots and clearly enjoys writing in the old tongue, so much so that he lets it run away with him. Despite the richness of vocabulary and expressiveness of the Monypennys' conversations, the reader begins to wonder what their long disquisitions on the merits of their children have to do with moving the story forward. The answer, sadly, is nothing much.*

*Similarly the moralizing tone of passages of authorial comment is not to twenty-first century taste and at least some of them could be omitted to advantage. However, the author must have scandalized mid-nineteenth century readers with his defence of and appeals for sympathy for the unmarried mother, Flora Graham. His arguments here are far more in tune with present day thinking and in some respects the book is quite modern. We sometimes think that Thomas Hardy broke new ground when **Tess of the D'Urbervilles** hit the bookshops amid moral outrage at his sympathetic portrayal of the 'fallen woman'. **The Dark Night** had taken a similar approach over thirty years earlier.*

*Although the book may have a local provenance, anyone looking for hard evidence that it depicts Juniper Green will be disappointed. The setting is not described in any detail and the geography is vague. The river in the book seems too large for the Water of Leith and there is only the sub title and the dialect of the Monypennys to place the story definitely in the Lothians. Perhaps the first syllable of the name Fouatt - certainly unusual, if not invented, - was intended to echo that of Foulis of Woodhall as the biggest local landowner. The author is reputed to have been Thomas Finnie, grandson of the local poet James Thomson. At the time of publication many locals supposed it to have been written by Dr Cunningham of Currie, whose reputation suffered dreadfully as a result of the racy subject matter. Why it should have been assumed that Juniper Green's especially sinful nature stimulated the author to write his tale has to remain a matter for conjecture, though regular kirk session fulminations against "ante-nuptial fornication" might have had something to do with it.*